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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 000475

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SUBJECT: IRAQI ELECTION CAMPAIGN UPDATE: FEBRUARY 22, 2010

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[B](#). BAGHDAD 441

[C](#). BAGHDAD 440

Classified By: Acting Political Minister-Counselor Yuri Kim for Reasons
1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Iraq's electoral campaign continues to proceed apace with less than two weeks left until voting day. Reports in the Western press of a Sunni election boycott are vastly exaggerated; there are no serious indications that Sunni voters will stay away from the polls in meaningful numbers in protest of the recent de-Ba'athification controversy. Even MP Saleh al-Mutlaq and his supporters are wavering in their calls for a boycott. While there continue to be credible reports of campaign abuses, unfair tactics, and intimidation of both candidates and party supporters, USF-I has not/not detected a sustained spike in overall violence since the campaign season opened. The Embassy will continue to stress the importance of a fair, transparent, and inclusive election process in meetings with relevant contacts. END SUMMARY.

CAMPAIGN IN FULL SWING

[1](#)2. (SBU) Thousands of election candidates actively campaigned throughout Iraq the past several days. Campaign posters and banners have saturated major thoroughfares, blast walls, and even fences in many cities, particularly in Baghdad and Basra; campaign advertisements are almost omnipresent on the television airwaves. Some candidates and parties are using cell phone text messages to spread their message. Most posters simply contain a candidate's name, picture, ballot number and brief slogan. Others are much more elaborate, with references to impressive educational credentials and previous offices held. In the case of Shatha al-Sultani, it was her familial and tribal connections that said it all. Her message is: Vote for Shatha Razaq Noman al-Sultani, who is not only Um Sajad (literally "the mother of Sajad"), but also the wife of Sheikh Ahmed al-Kenani, who is the brother of Sheikh Malik al-Kenani; the only person pictured is a man, presumably either Sajad, Ahmed, or Malik. Campaign activities may increase in the coming days as the Iraqiyya coalition announced on February 20 that it was formally ending its campaign freeze in protest of the disqualification of some of its candidates for alleged Ba'athist ties. (Comment: It is uncertain how strictly this freeze may have been observed. Campaign posters for Iraqiyya head Ayad Allawi and other candidates of the coalition quickly appeared on Iraqi streets as soon as the formal campaign season began on February 12. End Comment.)

[1](#)3. (SBU) Some campaign materials continue to display sectarian messages, particularly in the south where anti-Ba'athist sentiment is running high. One poster for former PM Ibrahim al-Ja'afari states, under his photo, "There is no place for the Ba'ath in Iraq." More disturbing has been the airing of gruesome television ads showing historical footage of Ba'ath Party loyalists killing Shi'a Iraqis. Both

al-Furat TV, controlled by ISCI, and the al-Afaq station, affiliated with Maliki's Da'wa Party, have aired this footage. One ad on al-Afaq displayed the beheadings of Shi'a while a news headline underneath reminded viewers that Sunni MP Saleh al-Mutlaq had been banned from the elections due to his Ba'athist connections.

¶4. (SBU) Prominent Iraqi officials are among those active on the campaign trail. Beginning an extended campaign swing in the south, PM Maliki arrived in Dhi Qar province on February 19 to attend a tribal conference and meet with local officials. The following day, Maliki inaugurated eight water desalination centers in southern Basra. During a press conference in the city of Basra, the PM made a point of impugning incompetent officials for failing to protect Iraq's security and sovereignty. Approximately 1,500 people welcomed Maliki in the city of Amarah in Maysan province on February 21, where he opened a major road overpass. On the Sunni side, Deputy PM Rafi'e al-Issawi visited his hometown of Fallujah, the biggest city in Anbar, on February 20 and strongly encouraged its residents to vote in the elections. Imams from the Anbar Sunni Endowment told PRToffs that they expected Issawi to have a strong electoral showing in the province. Parliamentary Speaker Iyad al-Samarrai arrived in Mosul on February 20 to attend a campaign rally in Ninewa and inspect local preparations for the elections, traveling north from there to Erbil February 22 to see KRG President Barzani in a highly publicized meeting.

¶5. (SBU) One prominent candidate absent from the domestic campaign trail is Ayad Allawi, head of Iraqiyya. Rather than mingle with voters in Iraq, he has been abroad yet again the

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past several days, visiting Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE and Egypt. According to press reports, Allawi met with Saudi King Abdullah on February 20; he is due to return to Iraq on February 22. (Note: The Sadrist Trend railed against Allawi's travel on its party website and Iraqi news outlets, calling on the GOI to prosecute Allawi for "soliciting foreign intervention in Iraqi elections." End Note.) Other candidates are also apparently taking a more laissez-faire approach. Numerous candidates for Karbala province who live and work in Baghdad, for example, are reportedly choosing to spend the bulk of their time in the capital.

THE SUNNI BOYCOTT THAT NEVER WAS

¶6. (C) Western media reports of a Sunni election boycott are vastly overblown. On February 20, the Sunni-majority Iraqiyya coalition, which still technically includes MP Saleh al-Mutlaq and his Iraqi Front for National Dialogue (IFND) party, announced in a press statement that it would fully participate in the elections while still pressing for a political solution to the disqualification of its candidates.

"The Iraqiyya bloc, while facing several challenges and pressures, believes that the best response is the wide participation of constituencies in the coming election," declared the statement. DPM Issawi confirmed to PolCouns late February 20 that Iraqiyya was "definitely not boycotting" and was actively encouraging all its supporters to vote. Other prominent Iraqiyya candidates outside of Mutlaq's party, including Adnan Pachachi, have reiterated the same firm position.

¶7. (C) A broad canvassing of Sunni leaders within other coalitions and parties shows no mainstream support for a boycott, and in fact most are going on the stump harder than ever. The Sunni-dominated Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) issued a statement February 22 expressing regret at the IFND's withdrawal from the election race and declaring that the building of the Iraqi state "requires the participation of all segments of the Iraqi society." At a lavish wedding party on February 20 that included many notable Iraqis

(septel), Sunni Sheikh Ali Hattam of the Alliance of Iraqi Banners party -- the only significant Sunni entity in Maliki's State of Law coalition -- criticized the recent de-Ba'athification of candidates but said that he expected Sunnis to nevertheless vote in force. Also at the party, MP Mithal al-Alusi, the secular Sunni head of the Iraqi Nation party, rejected the idea of a boycott and said that Mutlaq's supporters would likely vote for Allawi. During a February 21 Diyala Tribal Council meeting, senior sheikhs (including Sunnis) from around the province confirmed that there was no validity to news reports that some tribes in Diyala were considering boycotting the elections.

¶8. (SBU) Sunni imams, many of whom are affiliated with the IIP, called on listeners during their recent Friday sermons to participate in the elections. (Note: Shi'a imams also continue to encourage Iraqis to vote. Reflecting the view of Iraq's Shi'a religious establishment, in particular as embodied by Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the Friday message at the al-Hussein Shrine delivered by Sayed Ahmed al-Safi included strong reminders about the importance of the upcoming election and urged those listening to participate freely: "The responsibility lays on all of you without exception." End Note.) Representatives of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), which are conducting wide-ranging voter education efforts in Iraq, report that they have not detected a mood or trend among Sunni voters against voting in the elections.

¶9. (C) Even Mutlaq, the one notable Sunni voice calling for a boycott, appears to be wavering. In a phone call from Amman, Mutlaq told PolCouns February 21 that candidates in the IFND were no longer campaigning, but admitted that they were not seeking to be taken off the ballots either. (Note: The list of candidate names and their ballot numbers for the election can no longer be altered. End Note.) He said he was prepared to announce his party's return "once I am sure the election will be fair." During a February 19 meeting in Ankara with U.S. Ambassador to Turkey James Jeffrey, Turkish ambassador to Iraq Murat Ozelik received a phone call from Mutlaq (who was in Damascus at the invitation of the Syrian government) in which Ozelik urged him not to boycott the elections. Mutlaq appeared to have already relented as he complained to Ozelik about Allawi's reluctance to allow him to announce his party's return to the campaign from an Iraqiyya venue. (Comment: Mutlaq visited KRG President Barzani in Erbil February 20 and claimed to PolCouns that Barzani promised to do "anything I can" to get him back on the ballot. This is likely wishful thinking. Barzani Chief of Staff Fuad Hussein reported that the meeting had gone well, but that Mutlaq's

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expectations were too high. End Comment.)

¶10. (C) Aside from Mutlaq, other IFND candidates appear ambivalent at best about the boycott call. In a conversation with Emboff on February 21, MP Mustafa al-Hiti refused to directly confirm that he would not participate in the elections. While saying at one point that there was a collective decision within the IFND to boycott the elections, he later added that IFND members would "not give up their rights and positions until the last minute before the elections." MP Mohammad al-Tameem, who is contesting a parliamentary seat in Kirkuk, told the press February 21 that, "We will take part in the election; we must, otherwise we will lose our ability to influence the future of Iraq." Tameem also said Mutlaq would "continue the way of peaceful politics" and denied that the embattled IFND leader was attempting to undermine the Iraqi political process or instigate an armed conflict.

CAMPAIGN VANDALISM AND INTIMIDATION

¶11. (SBU) Many campaign posters in some areas of Iraq have been torn, ripped down, or defaced with mud or paint thrown across candidates' faces. Vandals burned some of Maliki's posters and slung black paint and mud on those of Ayad Allawi in several Shi'a-majority Baghdad neighborhoods over the local weekend, for example. Two smaller parties claimed that they lost 90% of their signs in the Ur neighborhood in Baghdad's Adhamiyyah district. This vandalism is not confined to Sunni-Shi'a animosity, but likely also reflects rivalries between Shi'a-dominated parties and coalitions. To help stem this problem, a spokesman for the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) on February 18 publicly reminded Iraqis of prison penalties of at least one month and up to one year for individuals destroying legitimate campaign propaganda. The Interior Ministry confirmed on February 19 that it arrested five groups of people the previous evening on suspicion of tearing down or defacing campaign posters.

¶12. (C) Reports continue to surface of election candidates or party supporters being harassed or detained by GOI security forces. A Sadrist candidate believed to be associated with the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) was arrested February 22 in Wasit province. While providing no specifics, Salim al-Jabouri, spokesman for the Sunni Tawafuq coalition, alleged to local press on February 19 that security forces were carrying out "wide arrest operations" related to the elections in Diyala. (Note: The arrest of an Iraqiyya member of the Diyala Provincial Council (PC) on February 7 has led to charges that the central government is trying to shape election results in Diyala. This comes on top of earlier detentions and warrants against IIP members of the PC; see ref A). Despite these claims, however, there is no convincing evidence of organizational intimidation occurring on a broad scale in the country. (Note: Poloffs have repeatedly asked various aggrieved parties to provide us with detailed information that we might pursue with the GOI, but thus far our contacts have failed to follow-up. End Note.) Similarly, while members of the security forces have allegedly handed out campaign materials for PM Maliki's State of Law Alliance (SLA) or Interior Minister Bolani's Coalition for Iraq's Unity (CIU), reports of these violations are isolated and have not generated significant media attention.

ELECTION VIOLENCE: PERCEIVED OR REAL?

¶13. (SBU) In the largest terrorist incident of the last week, Q13. (SBU) In the largest terrorist incident of the last week, a suicide car bomb detonated February 18 near a checkpoint outside the Anbar government center in Ramadi, killing at least 11 people and wounding many others. Other notable violent acts during the last few days include a February 18 car bomb in Mosul near a police station that injured more than 20 individuals, and the killing of five police officers by a roadside bomb near Khanaqin on February 21. Several Christians in Ninewa province have reportedly been murdered or kidnapped during this time period as well. (Note: It is not clear if these attacks on Christians are related to the election. In any case, Christian leaders have told PRToffs and the local press that violence against Christians will not affect their communities' attitudes towards voting. End Note.) In the wake of several violent incidents in the Kurdish province of Sulemaniyah, including a shooting attributed to PUK security forces that resulted in the wounding of three Goran party supporters at a campaign gathering, the local IHEC office imposed a curfew on campaigning in the province from 2100 to 0600 until March 5, two days prior to the March 7 elections.

¶14. (C) Apart from the violence in Sulemaniyah, the extent to which these incidents may be directly related to the upcoming

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elections is debatable. It is certainly possible that at least some of them were designed to create an atmosphere of fear so as to deter Iraqis from voting or to weaken PM

Maliki's security record, thereby hurting his election prospects. On the other hand, Iraq remains a violent place and many crimes are committed for non-political reasons. USF-I has not/not detected a sustained spike in overall violence in Iraq since the campaign season opened. Initial reports of the assassination of election candidates since the murder of an Iraqiyya candidate in Mosul on February 7 (ref B) have proven unfounded. USF-I confirmed, however, an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate an Iraqiyya candidate outside of Mosul via a roadside bomb on February 22.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) With less than two weeks to go until March 7, the election campaign has proceeded relatively well given the security and political challenges facing Iraq. Incidents of campaign abuses, dirty tactics, and the intimidation of both candidates and party supporters are unfortunate, but inevitable in the charged electoral environment. The Code of Conduct adopted by Iraq's major coalitions to stem election-related violence and tensions (ref C) has regrettably gained little traction in public. While UN SRSG Ad Melkert embraced the code in a February 21 UNAMI press statement and called on all parties and candidates to sign on to the initiative, Iraqi political leaders have to date largely ignored it in their public statements. Nevertheless, the Embassy will continue to underscore the importance of abiding by its principles in all relevant engagements. End Comment.

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